

Humour and Status Reversal in Greek Shadow Theatre

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Traditional plays of the Greek shadow theatre deal with the adventures of Karaghiozis, a poor Greek who is the embodiment of *πονηρία* (cunning, slyness). Plays of the comic type,¹ and more specifically, plays in which Karaghiozis assumes a position requiring certain skills,² have a standard narrative structure or plot which can be summarized as follows: A wealthy Turkish pasha or vizier, looking for a person to perform a job which requires certain skills, meets Hadziavatis, the subservient town crier, and asks for his help in finding such a person. Hadziavatis agrees at once, sets off, and invariably meets Karaghiozis, who, upon learning of the position the Turk is trying to fill, immediately claims to possess the prerequisite skills. With much humour and cleverness Karaghiozis convinces first Hadziavatis and then the Turk that he can in fact perform the job. Karaghiozis then appears on stage as the skilled person with the appropriate costume or equipment (cook's hat, doctor's bag, secretary's writing implements, etc.). He is

1. For the customary tripartite classification of Greek shadow theatre plays into comic plays, historic or heroic plays, and plays inspired by traditional folktales, see K. Biris, 'Ο Καραγκιόζης, έλληνικό λαϊκό θέατρο, *Nea Estia*, II (1952), 35, and G. Ioannou, 'Ο Καραγκιόζης, I (Athens, 1971), p. 55. For a discussion of the problems raised by this classification see L. Danforth, *Greek Shadow Theatre: A Metasocial Commentary* (unpublished Master's Thesis, Princeton University, Department of Anthropology, 1974), pp. 14–25.

2. Plays of this type include 'Karaghiozis the Secretary', 'Karaghiozis the Spiritualist', 'Karaghiozis the Baker', 'Karaghiozis the Doctor', 'Karaghiozis the Prime Minister for Two Hours', etc.

transformed from a poor uneducated man of low status into a skilled educated man of high status. In that position he deceives several stock characters, such as Omorphonios, Dionysios and Stavrakas, until his deceit is finally exposed and he is chased off stage.

This article will begin by examining the relationship between the humour in Greek shadow theatre and the status transformation or reversal which is an essential feature of the social relationships depicted in the plays; it will then propose a theory which views both types of phenomena as attempts to explore, understand and reaffirm systems of social and cultural categories.

According to Mary Douglas, humour can be understood as a challenge by a subordinate pattern of relations, characterized by disorder and lack of control, against a dominant pattern characterized by order and control. A humorous situation has a subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas because 'its form consists of a victorious tilting of uncontrol against control, it is an image of the levelling of hierarchy, the triumph of intimacy over formality, of unofficial values over official ones.'³

However, jokes and other forms of humour do not present a permanent or serious challenge to the dominant pattern of relations. As Douglas states (pp. 365, 374):

The joke merely affords opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity. Its excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective. It is frivolous in that it produces no real alternative, only an exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general. . . . [A joke reveals] the arbitrary, provisional nature of the very categories of thought, by lifting their pressure for a moment and suggesting other ways of structuring reality.

In much of the humour of Greek shadow theatre the dominant structure of ideas represents proper, polite or refined values and behaviour. For example, the formal exchange of polite greetings can be understood as a dominant pattern of

3. Mary Douglas, 'The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception', *Man*, III (1968), 366.

relations which is challenged by Karaghiozis' substitution of insults in the form of puns. Quite often the Turk greets Karaghiozis and, upon learning of his excellent qualifications for a particular job, says to him *Σᾶς συγχαίρω πολύ* ('I congratulate you very much'), to which Karaghiozis replies *Καί ἐγώ σᾶς σιχαίνομαι πολύ* ('And I detest you very much too'). Karaghiozis often substitutes the name of some demeaning animal, food or occupation for someone's proper title, such as *πατσᾶς* ('tripe') for *Πασᾶς* ('Pasha'), or *παπουτοῆς* ('shoemaker') for *ὑπασπιστής* ('adjutant'). Other examples of humour caused by the substitution of improper or vulgar objects for what is proper and expected involve the substitution of a mixture of vinegar and must for champagne and the substitution of castor oil for proper prescriptive medicine.⁴

After developing the structural model of humour outlined above, in which a dominant pattern of relations is challenged by another, Douglas asserts that this structure is replicated on the level of social organization, i.e. the broader context of the humorous interaction. She sees a correspondence between the structure of the joke and the structure of the social organization in which the joke takes place:

A joke is seen and allowed when it offers a symbolic pattern of a social pattern occurring at the same time. . . . All jokes are expressive of the social situations in which they occur. The one social condition necessary for a joke to be enjoyed is that the social group in which it is received should develop the formal characteristics of a 'told' joke. (p. 366.)

The challenge to the dominant pattern in the logical structure of a joke can be seen as a symbolic challenge to the dominant pattern in the structure of the social organization. A joke therefore represents a temporary release from a hierarchical system of social control.

Pre-revolutionary Greece—the social context for the traditional plays of the Greek shadow theatre—was ruled by a centralized Turkish administration whose chief function was to maintain control over its non-Moslem subjects and to collect taxes from them. Much of the humour of Greek shadow theatre,

4. Ioannou, *op. cit.*, pp. 81, 108–16.

directed as it is against the Turkish pasha or vizier, provides a replication on the symbolic level of the structure of the social organization in which it occurs. Karaghiozis' humour is a subversive challenge to the dominant system of control represented by the Turkish administration.

More specifically, the humour is replicated in the status reversal which Karaghiozis undergoes. This status reversal is the most complete expression of the shadow theatre's challenge to hierarchy and control. Before examining the reversal in detail, however, we must consider the concepts of prestige, status and honour, since these play an important role in bringing about Karaghiozis' transformation.⁵

The hierarchical principle of γόητρον ('prestige') is an important structural feature of Greek social organization. Individuals and families within a given community are differentiated and ranked according to their position in the hierarchy of prestige. The concept of prestige can be separated analytically into two categories, status and honour. Status includes the material elements of prestige such as wealth, occupation and education. This material foundation of prestige lies to a large degree beyond one's control. The second category which comprises prestige is τιμή ('honour'), in the sense of the recognition of one's value or worth. In dealing with the concept of honour in this sense, Pitt-Rivers' term 'honour=precedence' is very useful. Honour=precedence, or 'the pecking order theory of honour', involves a hierarchy of honour in which 'the person who submits to the precedence of others recognizes his inferior status. He is dishonoured in the sense that he has disavowed his claim to the higher status to which he aspired'.⁶ Claims to honour are competitive assertions of superiority over others. Social interactions therefore often become contests for honour in which the prestige of the victor is enhanced by the humiliation of the defeated.

It is in the context of a discussion of honour=precedence that the competitive quality of Greek social relations can best be understood. One's honour is often tested, challenged and

5. For a more detailed discussion of these concepts see J. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage* (London, 1964), pp. 263–316, and J. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame* (London, 1965).

6. J. Pitt-Rivers, 'Honour and Social Status', in Peristiany, op. cit., p. 23.

compared to that of others. Social relationships are competitive because any claim to honour must be acknowledged by others. This point is expressed by Pitt-Rivers as follows:

Honour is the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society. It is his estimation of his own worth, his claim to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by society, his right to pride. . . . The claimant to honour must get himself accepted at his own evaluation, must be granted reputation, or else the claim becomes mere vanity, an object of ridicule or contempt.⁷

Social life is a continuing process of negotiation in which claims to honour are put forth and either acknowledged or rejected. If one is forceful in one's claims to honour=precedence, and if one is skilful or powerful enough to insist upon them, one attains a high position in the hierarchy of honour=precedence. Forceful self-assertion is thus an important factor in successful negotiations of honour=precedence. As Campbell states:

A man must behave in such a way as to show that he believes himself to be superior to other persons. It requires a suggestion of presumptuousness, a subtle air of arrogance, that suggests a man is dominating the gathering, and yet does not proceed as far as an insult or open challenge to others. It is an important element in prestige, but it is also largely derivative from it. A poor man of . . . low prestige cannot give himself these airs without provoking ridicule.⁸

A man's prestige is not totally within his control since it is dependent in part on material elements; nevertheless, it may to a large extent be manipulated or negotiated in social interactions by claims to honour=precedence. Within the partial constraints imposed by the social facts of status, wealth and power, each social interaction gives a man the opportunity to negotiate his position in a hierarchy of social prestige either

7. Pitt-Rivers, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–2.

8. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

by claiming more honour=precedence than his social status entitles him to, or by surrendering these claims—in which case he is humiliated and loses prestige.

The interdependence of honour and status as components of social prestige can be illustrated as follows. Families which have very little prestige because of extreme poverty 'are denied the imputation of honour even though no positive accusation of dishonour can be pointed against them. . . . A poor man is dependent on others for employment or favours if his family is to survive. He is not in a position to insist upon an equality of honour which, in any case, the community will not allow him.'⁹ Displays of pride and claims to honour must be based on social reality. A person's claims to honour must in some sense be proportionate to his status. If they are not, he is exposed to ridicule and mockery. The two categories of elements of prestige are therefore interdependent and both are involved in the evaluation of an individual's total prestige. 'Without the imputation of honour and the quality of being honourable, wealth and numbers only represent a prestige which is, at best, equivocal. And weakness or poverty draws in its train doubts about the honour of a family.'¹⁰

The hierarchy of honour=precedence which is established in social relations of this kind tends therefore to reaffirm or support the hierarchy of status which is in a sense non-negotiable or predetermined by given, material elements of prestige. In this way a hierarchy of prestige is created out of a predetermined hierarchy of status and a negotiable hierarchy of honour=precedence. In a particular social interaction a person of high status will inevitably claim a high degree of honour=precedence, and this claim will undoubtedly be acknowledged. In this way such negotiations of honour=precedence 'establish the consensus of the society with regard to the order of precedence . . . validating the realities of power and making the sanctified order or precedence correspond to them. . . . The transactions of honour are the means whereby individuals find their role within the social organization.'¹¹

An excellent example of this type of social interaction is the opening scene of most Greek shadow theatre plays in which the

9. Ibid., p. 273.

10. Ibid., p. 306.

11. Pitt-Rivers, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

Turk meets Hadziavatis and asks him to find someone with a particular skill. The relative status of the two characters is obvious from the Turk's palace on the one hand and Hadziavatis' repeated references to poverty on the other. Hadziavatis always behaves politely and humbly towards the Turk, greeting him with such phrases as *Προσκυνῶ, μπέη μου, ὁ καημένος, προσκυνῶ*. ('I pay my respects, bey. I, poor wretch, pay my respects') and *Εἶμαι στάς διαταγὰς σας. Γῆς, γεφύρι, νά γίνω νά μέ πατεῖτε*. ('I am at your command. I would become the earth or a bridge for you to tread on me.') The Turk rewards Hadziavatis with payment for his services and addresses him in the following manner: *Πραγματικά, εἶσαι ἕνας πιστός ραγιάς*. ('You are truly a faithful rayah.')

¹² In this social interaction, because Hadziavatis subordinates himself to the Turk and sacrifices his claims to honour=precedence in return for personal consideration and material favours, the negotiation of honour=precedence quickly reinforces the pre-existing hierarchy of status.

But the relations between Karaghiozis and the Turk are different. The status reversal which characterizes them can now be understood in light of the preceding discussion of prestige, status and honour. When Karaghiozis meets the Turk, he claims to be the skilled person who is being sought. Since Karaghiozis claims to possess attributes or qualities needed by the Turk but not possessed by him—such as a knowledge of foreign languages, a university education, or experience as a world traveller—he is in fact claiming a higher position in the hierarchy of status than that enjoyed by the Turk himself. This is indicated by Karaghiozis' practice of addressing the Turk in the informal second person singular, while the Turk addresses Karaghiozis in the polite second person plural. The spectators, aware of the discrepancy between Karaghiozis' claimed status and his actual one, derive a great deal of amusement from this. In their eyes the Turk is humiliated and loses prestige because he accepts Karaghiozis' false claim as the truth. Karaghiozis has brought about a situation in which the normal hierarchy of status, according to which the Turk is at the top and Karaghiozis at the bottom, is reversed.

12. Ioannou, *op. cit.*, pp. 4, 90, and P. Michopoulos, *Πέντε κωμωδίες και δύο ἡρωϊκά* (Athens, 1972), p. 147.

The problem remains: How does Karaghiozis successfully assert this false claim and impose it on others? How does he successfully bring about this status reversal?

His method, when his claims are challenged, is to defend them by responding with further claims, a counter-challenge, or an insult. The Turk fails to understand the insult, or is intimidated to such an extent that he accepts Karaghiozis' claims and makes no attempt to defend himself against the insults. Consider the following example from 'Karaghiozis the Pharmacist', in which the Turk, Mehmet, is about to entrust his pharmacy to Karaghiozis:¹³

MEMET—Κύριε φαρμακοποιέ, ἐδῶ εἶναι τό φαρμακεῖο.

Βλέπετε ὅτι εἶναι ὅλα ἐν τάξει, δέ λείπει τίποτε.

ΚΑΡΑΓΚΙΟΖΗΣ—Σαρδέλες δέν ἔχεις, ρέγγες;

MEMET—Μά, στό φαρμακεῖο ρέγγες καί σαρδέλες, τί νά τίς κάνεις;

ΚΑΡΑΓΚΙΟΖΗΣ—Τί νά τίς κάνω; Δέν ζέρεις τή δουλειά σου, καημένε. Κρεμμύδια;

MEMET—Κρεμμύδια ἔχω ἐκεῖ μέσα πού μαγειρεύω.

ΚΑΡΑΓΚΙΟΖΗΣ—Ὡραῖα, ζέρω γώ τί θά κάνω. Ὅποιος ἔρθει γιά φάρμακα, δέ θά ζαναρθεῖ ποτέ ἐδῶ· νά μείνεις ἡσυχος.

MEMET—Μπράβο, παιδί μου, μπράβο, φαίνεται ὅτι εἶσαι καλός.

Memet: Mr. Pharmacist, here is the pharmacy. You see that everything is in order. Nothing is missing.

Karaghiozis: Don't you have sardines or herring?

Memet: But herring and sardines in a pharmacy? What would you do with them?

Karaghiozis: What would I do with them? You don't know your job, my poor man. Onions?

Memet: I have onions there, inside where I cook.

Karaghiozis: Great. I know what I'll do. Whoever comes for medicine will never come back here again. Don't you worry.

Memet: Bravo, my boy, bravo. You seem to be just fine.

Karaghiozis succeeds in asserting his false claims to a position of

13. Ioannou, op. cit., p. 102.

high status and in imposing them on the Turk by forceful, effective negotiations of honour=precedence during which Karaghiozis employs various strategies including deceit, humour, forceful self-assertion and the display of pride. Through successful negotiations of honour=precedence, negotiations which usually support the status hierarchy, Karaghiozis establishes a new hierarchy of honour=precedence which has no foundation in the actual status hierarchy, but which overthrows it and creates a new status hierarchy which is a complete reversal of the actual one.

In terms of the model of humour proposed by Douglas, the dominant pattern of relations which constitutes a system of order and control, i.e. the usual status hierarchy confirmed by the negotiated hierarchy of honour=precedence, is challenged by a subordinate pattern of relations, i.e. the inverted hierarchy of honour=precedence which is negotiated by Karaghiozis and which creates a temporary period of status reversal. But, just as in jokes and other forms of humour the subordinate pattern of relations does not present a permanent or serious challenge to the dominant pattern, so on the social level the status reversal created by Karaghiozis does not seriously threaten the actual status hierarchy, since Karaghiozis' deceit is exposed at the end of the play, and the actual status hierarchy is reimposed. Therefore both humour and status reversal express a *temporary* release from a dominant system of order and control.

Humour and status reversal in Greek shadow theatre can now be considered in the context of the more general category which Victor Turner has called 'rituals of status reversal'. In these rituals 'the structurally inferior aspire to symbolic structural superiority'.¹⁴ In other words, groups or categories of people who usually occupy low positions in the hierarchy of social status temporarily exercise authority over their superiors. Such rituals are

often accompanied by robust verbal and non-verbal behaviour, in which inferiors revile and even physically maltreat superiors. . . . The liminality of the permanently structural inferior contains as its key social element a symbolic or make-believe elevation of the ritual subjects to

14. V. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago, 1969), p. 203.

positions of eminent authority. The stronger are made weaker; the weak act as though they were strong. The liminality . . . of the weak represents a fantasy of structural superiority.¹⁵

Turner goes on to assert that rituals of status reversal reaffirm the hierarchical principles according to which the social organization is structured. Similarly Gluckman has stated that rituals characterized by reversed and inverted behaviour 'somehow were believed to achieve good for the community' (emphasis added), and that they renewed the unity of the social system 'in complex ways'.¹⁶ However, these theories which claim that the temporary expression of reversal leads to a reaffirmation of the structural principles of the social organization or to increased identification with them do not explain why people identify more closely with something after having experienced its opposite. How is the usual social order affirmed by an expression of its reversal?

The 'cultural-cognitive explanation' of this type of ritual behaviour proposed by N. R. Crumrine suggests a solution to this problem. Crumrine sees humour and status reversal as expressions of confusion, disorder, incongruity, anomaly and inversion with respect to the social and cultural categories with which we structure our preception of the world.¹⁷

The following examples from Greek shadow theatre will help clarify this approach. Karaghiozis is often responsible for the incongruous and therefore humorous juxtaposition of categories or domains which are usually quite separate. In 'Karaghiozis the Captain', for example, Karaghiozis tricks his uncle Barbagiorgos, a shepherd from Roumeli, into becoming a boatswain on a merchant ship. Two domains are established, that of a shepherd in a mountain village, and that of a sailor at sea. An extended metaphor develops which deals with Barbagiorgos' inexperience with life at sea and his

15. Ibid., pp. 167–8.

16. M. Gluckman, *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa* (Glenco, Illinois, 1960), pp. 112, 118.

17. N. R. Crumrine, 'Capakoba, The Mayo Easter Ceremonial Impersonator: Explanations of Ritual Clowning', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, VIII (1969), 1–22.

interpretation of events in this domain in terms of his own experience as a shepherd. He calls the painter of the boat ‘the halter’. When the wind blows and the boat begins to rock, he says *‘Αἰ μανούλα μου, μὴν τό τσιγλάς, ὦρέ, καὶ τσινάει!* (‘Don’t goad it, fool. It’s kicking.’) to which Karaghiozis replies: *Τὶ διάολο, μωρέ μπουῦφο, γιὰ μουλάρι τό πέρασες;* (‘What the devil, you idiot, did you take it for a mule?’)¹⁸

The status reversal which Karaghiozis undergoes in plays of the comic type creates disorder and confusion by blurring the boundaries between different categories. He usually passes from one clearly defined status (uneducated and unskilled) to another (educated and skilled). In this manner he fuses two categories which should be kept separate. He equates things which are different. For example, in ‘Karaghiozis the Captain’, where Karaghiozis claims to be a sea captain, he equates the categories *ἀραμπατζής* (‘carter’) and *καπετάνιος* (‘sea captain’) as follows:¹⁹

*ΚΑΡΑΓΚΙΟΖΗΣ—‘Ο πατέρας μου τί ἦτον;
ΧΑΤΖΙΑΒΑΤΗΣ—Τί ἦτο, Καραγκιόζη μου;
ΚΑΡΑΓΚΙΟΖΗΣ—Δέν ἦτον ἀραμπατζής;
ΧΑΤΖΙΑΒΑΤΗΣ—Καὶ τί σχέση ἔχει ὁ ἀραμπατζής μέ τόν
καπετάνιο;
ΚΑΡΑΓΚΙΟΖΗΣ—Μωρέ, ἀλήθεια, καπετάνιος σπουδαῖο
πράγμα: κάθεται κρατάει τό τιμόνι καὶ πάει μόνο του τό
καράβι. Νά εἶσαι ἀραμπατζής καὶ νά πιάσει καροφουρτούνα
νά σοῦ πῶ ἐγώ, Χατζατζάρη μου!*

Karaghiozis: What was my father?

Hadziavatis: What was he, Karaghiozis?

Karaghiozis: Wasn’t he a carter?

Hadziavatis: What does a carter have to do with a captain?

Karaghiozis: Fool. A captain is really a big deal. He sits and holds the helm and the boat goes by itself. But to be a carter and get caught in a cart-storm—— I’ll tell you, Hadzadzari!

In ‘The Inn of Barbagiorgos’, Karaghiozis, working as a cook, confuses different categories of food. Three different kinds of

18. Ioannou, op. cit., p. 133.

19. Ibid., p. 122.

substitution take place. First Kollitiris, Karaghiozis' son, reads the menu and substitutes 'non-food' for food. He offers the customers donkey, mouse and cat instead of beef, quail and pork. Karaghiozis then reads the menu himself and offers them such things as *Σούπα μοσχαράκι, παραληφθέν ἐκ τῆς κιβωτοῦ τοῦ Νῶε* ('beef soup left over from Noah's Ark'), *Ὀρτύκια ἐκ κυνηγίου προπερασμένου Αὐγούστου* ('quail caught on a hunt two years ago in August'), and *Σταφύλια, κατάλληλα διὰ γλυκάδι* ('grapes appropriate for vinegar'). This substitution, which is less extreme and offensive than the first, is followed by a third. Karaghiozis forgets the customers' orders and says: *Τί μέ νοιάζει ἐμένα; Ἐγὼ θά τοὺς πάω ἀπὸ μιά μερίδα φαί, ἀπὸ ὅποιο μοῦ κατέβει στό μυαλό, καί ἄς δέν βαριέται.* ('What difference does it make to me? I'll take them a helping of food, whatever comes into my mind. It doesn't matter.') When a customer complains that he was served something different from what he ordered, Karaghiozis replies: *Ἐλα, μωρέ, τό ἴδιο εἶναι.* ('Come on, you fool. They're all the same.')

²⁰

The process by which the experience of confusion, disorder and reversal, illustrated by these examples from Greek shadow theatre, leads to increased identification with and understanding of the traditional systems of social and cultural categories is suggested by William James' 'law of dissociation', invoked by Turner as follows:

When 'a' and 'b' have occurred together as parts of the same total object, without being discriminated, the occurrence of one of these, 'a', in a new combination 'ax', favours the discrimination of 'a', 'b', and 'x' from one another. As James himself puts it, 'What is associated now with one thing and now with another, tends to become dissociated from either, and to grow into an object of abstract contemplation by the mind.'

²¹

The disorder, blurring of boundaries, and confusion of categories which characterize Greek shadow theatre dissociate many elements of Greek culture and society, forcing the audience to examine these individual elements in new and

²⁰. Ibid., pp. 74, 75, 79, 80.

²¹. V. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1967), p. 105.

atypical combinations. The theatre's humour and status reversal force its spectators to reconsider the categories according to which their perception of the universe is structured. In this way they 'more deeply understand and identify with their culture and society'.²²

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22. Crumrine, op. cit., p. 21. Important psychological mechanisms which underline this process of learning by dissociation and which lead to deeper insights into this type of behaviour have been examined by D. Berlyne in his studies of conflict, arousal and exploration: 'Curiosity and Exploration', *Science*, CLIII (1966), 25–33, and 'Conflict and Arousal', *Scientific American*, CCXV (1966), 82–7. He proposes the term 'collative stimulus properties' for those properties which can be generally described as novel, surprising, complex or puzzling. When such stimuli are perceived, they give rise to conceptual conflict and cognitive dissonance, which in turn produce a state of arousal, heightened attentiveness and increased motivation. This leads to a desire to acquire information which will eliminate the conceptual conflict caused initially by the collative stimulus properties. The kind of learning which is initiated by such stimuli 'can give rise not only to particularly rapid and lasting acquisition of knowledge but also, above all, to knowledge in which ideas are fruitfully pieced together in coherent structures' ('Conflict and Arousal', p. 84).